

## Commands for the King

HN 5/3/06 pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 17, Romans 13

Study Text: Deuteronomy 11:14-20

Sing Psalms: 146:1-6, 146:7-10, 33:13-18, 20:6-9

The question of the relationship between church and state seems to be a perennial one, at least in western nations. It had given rise to many heated debates and indeed to violence and wars over the centuries. In the news recently was a discussion about the religious right and its growing power in American politics. The USA has prided itself on the separation of church and state. Russia is not so clear about this separation, emerging as it has from absolute domination of the church by the state. The Church of Rome has its own state of course, and has at many times in history ruled over various states. What about Australia? Do church leaders have the right to get involved in politics? Does the government have the right to pass laws effectively preventing evangelism?

Our own church denomination took a stand against state interference in the church back in 1843 – at the ‘Disruption’ in Scotland. Leaders in the church held firm to the so called ‘Establishment Principle’ which says that church and state have clearly distinguished and defined roles and responsibilities. They rejected Erastian principles, yet maintained that the state had a responsibility to maintain true religion, and the church responsibility to obey the state and pray for politicians (Westminster Confession of Faith xxiii). This Establishment principle we understand to be founded on all Scripture, including the passage before us.

The people of God lived for 400 years in Egypt. Initially they were treated as guests under a good king who knew Joseph. But later on they were made slaves by a cruel and wicked king. The Lord appointed Moses to lead them out of this bondage in Egypt. Moses was priest and judge – God was their King. Joshua succeeded Moses. After Joshua the Lord *raised up judges...to deliver them out of the hand of their enemies* (Judges 2). All the while God remained king – he had given the law, and he fought and won their battles, while ever they were obedient.

But the time would come, said Moses, when they would ask for a king like all the nations around them (17:14). Moses expressed no objections to such a request. Rather he set forth specific commands that such a king must obey. Clearly the king was not supreme. He was to be chosen by God and learn to fear God and observe all the words of the law. This would contrast with the nations around where the king was supreme and often assumed divinity.

It was almost 400 years later when the people did ask Samuel to give them a king (1 Samuel 8). Samuel was upset and the Lord God was also offended. ‘It is not you they have rejected but me’ said the Lord. They wanted a king to judge them and go out and fight their battles like all the other nations. They wanted a king who was powerful, forgetting that it was the Lord who delivered them in their battles.

What Moses envisioned was not an independent monarchy, but a monarchy within a theocracy, as these commands demonstrate. The king was not to replace God as their sovereign Lord. He was to serve the people as their divinely **appointed** leader, not their divine leader. Covenant law was to govern the life of the king as well as the people. Specific commands for the king included:

Not a Foreigner

If the Lord was choosing the king then this command might appear superfluous. But the Lord would make his choice known through his servant, through a prophet like Samuel; so it was proper that this selection criterion be known and understood. The king must not be a foreigner, he must not be man *who is not your brother* (17:15). Brother did not refer to family or tribe of course – it was one who believed in God as you do.

In those days, and as until historically modern times, alliances with other nations often involved royal marriage. Even as marriage with foreigners or idolaters was prohibited generally in Israel (7:3), so it was for the king. Foreign blood was not to enter the royal household. A foreigner would be someone who worshipped other gods, and would not know covenant law, another requirement placed upon the king as we will see.

Not Multiply Horses

This reference is to warhorses, the mark of a modern, well equipped army in those days. Egypt was famous for its horses. But what happened to all the horses in the Egyptian king's army? *The horse and rider he has thrown into the sea* (Exodus 15:1). The Lord told his people not to trust in chariots and horses but to remember the name of the Lord your God (Psalm 20:7). *No king is saved by the greatness of his army...a horse is a vain hope for safety* (Psalm 33:16).

Kings like to be surrounded by a powerful army. They like to have all the latest weapons. When they feel powerful they want to go out and fight other nations and make the people their subjects. But not the king appointed by God (17:16). Sure this nation would have to defend itself against invaders, but the Lord would fight their battles and he would give them victory over all their enemies. He did this time and again, while ever they trusted and obeyed him.

We have had to defend our nation in war. We rightly remember those who fought and died defending our freedom; but let us not forget to thank God who gave the victory. Let us remind ourselves, and those around us of this truth, even as the ungodly object to prayer and Bible reading on Anzac day. And let us trust in the Lord, not just our military, to deliver us in future battles, whether against nations or Islamic terrorists.

Not Multiply Wives

The people wanted a king like other nations. It was common in such nations for the king to gather to himself a harem of beautiful women. He would need a lot of money to keep them of course. But the king of Israel was warned not to multiply wives *lest his heart be turned away* (17:17). It was not a matter of the expense, but of walking in the ways of the Lord. Foreign women in particular would lead him astray.

You will remember the king who took to himself seven hundred wives, including many foreign women (I Kings 11:3). Tragically, the otherwise wise king Solomon clung to these women in love and they turned his heart away from the Lord.

Not Multiply Money

Kings, like all men, are vulnerable to *the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life* (I John 2:16). They can be even more vulnerable because of the power they exercise. Hence the warning: not to lust after women, and not to lust after money. He shall not *greatly multiply silver and gold for himself* (17:17).

Samuel warned the people that a king would tax them and take all their money – in addition to their sons and daughters (I Samuel 8). Solomon taxed the people heavily. His son Rehoboam threatened to tax them even more but the people revolted against him and he lost most of the

kingdom (I Kings 12). Love for money can lead to the downfall of kings, just as with common people.

### Not Become Proud

Ungodly leadership is often marked by pride and arrogance. It must not be so with godly leader. The king must not let his heart be lifted up above his brethren (17:20). *The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them* said Jesus...*but it must not be so among you* (Luke 22:25). The king was still a brother. He was in fact the servant of the people – as the elders reminded Rehoboam. He must not become proud and arrogant. Rehoboam, like many others kings in Israel and in other nations, quickly discovered the danger of being proud and arrogant. The days of his kingdom were cut short and for many the days of their life were also cut short.

### Read the Law of God

We come finally to a ‘do’ rather than a ‘do not’ for the king. Avenues by which the king could be corrupted have been elucidated – weapons, women, wealth and pride. How does that saying go – ‘power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Well Moses sets in place a procedure by which the king would be constantly reminded that his power was not absolute. He would *learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law* (17:19).

*The king shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book...and he shall read it all the days of his life* (17:18-19). This book was not just for the priests and Levites. It was for the king and all the people to read and obey. When Joash was crowned king in Judah he was given a copy of this law (II Kings 11). This may well have been the practice, at least while the book of the law was extant.

A new sovereign in Britain is given a Bible – and we pray that they read it. All members of Parliament are given a Bible when they take the oath of office. We pray that they also read it, and that they learn to fear the Lord and be careful to observe his commands.

What do we conclude from these commands given to the king? Clearly we have here principles applicable to church/state relations. Paul told the Church in Rome that all *governing authorities are appointed by God* (Romans 13:1) – just like the king in Israel. If they are appointed by God they are responsible to God. God remains the supreme head over all nations. To fulfil their responsibility before God they must fear him and obey his commands. Those who exalt themselves, those who oppress the people and act wickedly will come under divine judgment.

Although not spelt out in this passage, the Lord made it clear to Saul, and later to Uzziah (II Chronicles 26), that the king was not to usurp the role of the priest. God appointed priests to conduct worship, not the king. A church having the king or queen as its head, titular or active, clearly has some explaining to do in the light of these texts.

What was common to both the king and the priest was the book of the law, and when either departed from this book they were to act to restore true religion in the land. This is the essence of the Establishment principle.

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